IRISH HILL-FORTS

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STUART PIGGOTT HAS WRITTEN '. . . the hill-fort, in one form or another, becomes the most typical field monument of the Celtic world from about the second century B.C. onwards from Iberia to Romania, from the Midi to the Baltic'.[1] The undoubted significance of the hill-fort as a means of throwing light on many of the problems of Iron Age research has been emphasised by the not inconsiderable concentration of research on these structures both in Britain and on the European mainland.

In Ireland, however, an island with a continuous tradition of Celtic occupation from the last centuries B.C. at least, the position is unfortunately otherwise. In this country the study of hill-forts has up to now been almost completely neglected. Seán P. Ó Ríordáin, writing in 1943, stated: 'These (Irish) hill-forts are presumably related to the enormous Iron Age hilltop camps of Britain, though, since none has been excavated in this country, we cannot speak with certainty of their date'.[2] Joseph Raftery, in his comprehensive work on Irish prehistory, written in 1951, considered the Irish Iron Age without once referring to the hill-forts as a type in Ireland[3]. Ralegh Radford in 1963 stated that '. . . in Ireland the hill-forts . . . are virtually lacking',[4] while two years later Françoise Henry wondered whether 'larger hilltop enclosures (in Ireland) may be the equivalents of the *oppida* of the Continental Celts'.[5] Most recently Estyn Evans had to confess to the general lack of knowledge of Irish hill-forts when he speculated: 'though some of the hill-forts should date to this time (the Early Iron Age), the archaeological evidence is meagre. The great Celtic hill-forts which in England were first constructed as univallate defences *c.* 300 B.C. have few parallels in Ireland . . .'.[6]

These few quotations illustrate how poorly have hill-forts fared in Irish archaeological studies. Not only is almost nothing known about them as a group but their very existence as a specific type is at times only grudgingly admitted. Clearly, the task of elucidating the many problems of the Irish hill-fort is an immense one, which can only proceed effectively if large-scale excavations are undertaken. Happily, this is already under way at four Irish sites.

This paper makes no claim to solve any of the outstanding problems. Rather will it pose questions without attempting solutions. It is an attempt to summarize in a brief form our present knowledge of Irish hill-fortsas based on extensive field surveys carried out by the author and on his intensive perusal of the available literature, limited though that is.[7]

The first problem which one encounters when attempting to discuss these monuments is the basic one, that of definition. It must be clear what exactly is meant when the term 'hill-fort' is used. The uncertainty of the definition is felt everywhere, but is even more pronounced in Ireland, where a multiplicity of enclosed settlement types abound in an embarrassingly rich and diverse assortment.

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The normal type of habitation in Ireland in protohistoric times and later is the so-called ringfort, a fairly small, usually circular area enclosed by stone or earthen ramparts. These sites are normally considered to have been small, family farmsteads, the surrounding banks, though often quite imposing, being considered as protection against wild animals or thieves, or as helping to fulfil man's fundamental psychological need to secure himself and his property within some sort of wall or fence, not necessarily in terms of military or strategic significance.

Ring-forts housed families of varying degrees of wealth, so that some raths are more impressively constructed than others. Sites such as Garranes[8] and Ballycatteen[9] in Cork, Staigue[10] in Kerry or Moneygashel[11] in Cavan may thus, perhaps, be taken as belonging to the wealthier in the community. Certainly, the imported wine flagons at the two Cork sites indicate that the wealth and importance of the occupants was above average. Possessing this wealth, they had both the means and the need to construct strong defences. The latter are, however, of economic rather than martial significance. It is, in the writer's opinion, incorrect to refer to such structures as hill-forts, as has, in fact, been done on several occasions.

Ring-forts do not normally occupy dominant or commanding positions except, perhaps, in ill-drained districts where the only places suitable for habitation were the more elevated areas. In drumlin country, especially, ring-forts are often situated on the tops of these rounded, glacial hills though, as Oliver Davies has noted, raths also occur frequently in the more sheltered positions on the slopes just below the summit.[12] None the less, though often in quite dominating positions, such structures are not hill-forts, by our definition. They do not in any sense attempt to encircle the hill with their ramparts and they retain their basic circular shape and small size. This distinction was noted sixty years ago by Thomas J. Westropp when, writing of the Tulla region of Clare, he said, 'the most striking feature in this district is the number of low, rounded, green hills . . . nearly every one of which is crowned by an earthen fort. These are not in any sense contour forts, not following the natural lines of the hill but are usually oval or round . . .'.[13]

Far greater problems arise, however, from a discussion of sites in the south and west of Ireland where small *cashels* (ring-forts built of stone) are situated on the summits of steep-sided rocky outcrops. For instance at Leacanabuaile, near Cahirciveen, Co. Kerry,[14] and at Carraig Aille, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick,[15] small stone structures of the ringfort type crown the summits of steep rock outcrops, three of the sides at the Kerry site in particular being positively precipitous. Here, a considerable degree of natural defence is provided by the chosen situation. But whether this was a consideration secondary to the need for a dry site or whether such sites were chosen purely for the not inconsiderable degree of defence which they provided, is a matter for conjecture. Whatever the reason, it is clear that those who constructed the two sites mentioned were not hill-fort builders. In neither case is the full potential of the site exploited; in fact, at Leacanabuaile the wall which encloses the buildings is set some considerable distance from the edge of the precipice and the entrance faces that part of the hill-slope where it is most gradual and where ascent is easiest.

At Cashlaungar, Co. Clare, a rock bastion rises almost vertically on all sides for a height of some ten metres.[16] A small, though strong, *cashel* crowns this outcrop and its walls closely hug the edges of the rock summit and continue the cliff-face vertically upwards for another two metres.

Sites such as the three mentioned above—and the list could be extended—underline the difficulties of an unambiguous definition of what a hill-fort is. Cashlaungar, for

instance, though certainly constructed in what seems to have been a deliberately defensive position and though clearly exploiting this situation to its fullest extent, is nevertheless a family homestead; its small size (internal dimensions, 40 m. by 27 m.) and its general affinities with the more normal type of *cashel* suggest that it and other sites with similar characteristics should not properly be included in a discussion on hill-forts.

The great cliff-top fortresses of rugged western areas are sites which, in contrast to those referred to above, clearly have a significance which can only be understood in tribal and military terms; as such they are without any doubt related to the hill-forts. Indeed, Dún Aengusa on Inishmore, Aran, Co. Galway, with its triple walls, its *chevaux de frise* and its exposed position high above the storm-prone, brooding Atlantic, demonstrates an almost obsessional desire on the part of the long-dead inhabitants for maximum security and safety.[17]

Irish sea-girth promontory forts form a clearly definable group of defended settlements around our coasts.[18] Approximately two hundred examples are now known, their distribution, perhaps, being governed only by the presence or absence of suitable promontory sites. Whereas this group of sites may well be Iron Age in origin and may well be related in some way to the far less frequent hill-forts in the interior of the country, the writer does not propose to discuss them specifically here in a paper devoted primarily to the inland structures.

From this varied and heterogeneous group of defended settlements the hill-fort stands out as a distinct and recognisable entity. In Ireland these monuments are seen to be extensive areas of land within one or more ramparts of earth or stone, defending, it must be assumed, rather than merely enclosing a hill-top or other strongly defensible natural position. The size, situation and magnitude of the defences of the hill-forts must denote centres of tribal rather than of family significance. In most cases the hill-fort may be regarded as having had, primarily, a defensive function, though in some exceptional cases religious importance or significance as places of inauguration or assembly may have contributed paramount distinction. The exact use to which the enclosed area was put is a matter of conjecture. It seems probable that most of the hill-forts constituted settlements of quite considerable size, but there seems little, if any, evidence that they ever achieved the status of towns. In the writer's opinion they are hardly to be regarded as places of temporary refuge to be occupied only in time of danger (though the exceptional site of Caherconree, Co. Kerry, situated at a height of 2050 feet in the mist-clad Kerry mountains, could, perhaps, be so regarded). There is, it seems, no evidence in the early literature of Ireland for places of temporary refuge being constructed and the often impressive ramparts surrounding ring-forts and the frequent presence of souterrains associated with these structures does not imply that they were to be precipitately abandoned in favour of the larger hill-forts when danger threatened.

When compared to the many thousands of small enclosed homesteads which exist in Ireland and the considerable numbers of hill-forts which exist on the Continent and in Britain[19] the number of hill-forts in Ireland is surprisingly small, even allowing for the virtual certainty that many more examples await discovery through air photography and detailed survey. The author has now been able to identify approximately forty sites in Ireland which can be included in the hill-fort category. They may be divided into three main classes:

Class I: Simple univallate sites of earth or stone, with or without an accompanying ditch.

Class II: Sites with widely-spaced, multivallate defences: (a) hill-top; (b) cliff-top.

Class III: Inland promontory forts.

There is some doubt in the author's mind as to whether a group comprising a number of small sites which apparently have indications of closely-set multivallation should be included as an additional class. These sites are at Dunbeg, Co. Down,[20] Glasbolie, Co. Donegal[21] and Clogher, Co. Tyrone.[22] However, a close examination of these three sites suggests that they may not all belong to the normal type of closely-set, multivallate hill-fort as represented by the so-called Iron Age B forts of southern Britain. They appear, in two instances at least (Dunbeg and Glasbolie) rather as elaborate examples of the more normal univallate group with the addition of a counter-scarp-type rampart: in both of these, the outer rampart is far more massive than the inner and, in these two instances at least, this may be due simply to the very steep slope of the hill. The site at Clogher is more complex and is the nearest approach in an Irish hill-fort to the classic Maiden Castle type of defence. But Clogher, with its internal ditch and its interesting internal mounds, is something quite different from the others, and is so far unique in Ireland.

At the time of writing, some twenty sites have been isolated by the writer which can be assigned to Class I, as outlined above. These vary considerably in size from as little as an acre in extent at Dunbeg, Co. Down, to almost forty times that area at Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare (Pl. II). They also vary considerably in plan, structure and situation. Defences may consist of a simple stone rampart as at Brusselstown Ring, Co. Wicklow (Pl. III), which is a large, oval hill-fort with axes measuring about 300 m. by 190 m. On Dunmurry Hill, Co. Kildare, on the other hand, there is a pear-shaped fort, consisting of what appears to be an earthen bank with faint traces of an external ditch enclosing an area measuring some 350 m. by 220 m. Excavation at Cathedral Hill, Downpatrick, Co. Down, revealed an earthen rampart strengthened by the addition of a strong, timber framework, within the body of the bank.[23] This feature may, of course, exist elsewhere also but only excavation can reveal its presence. Rath Maeve at Tara, Co. Meath, is a circular enclosure approximately 230 m. in diameter, consisting of a massive earthen bank with a silted-up external ditch.[24] A similar structure exists in Garrangrena Lower townland, near Borrosoleigh, Co. Tipperary, where a steep-sided hill, 1050 feet high, is defended by a circular bank and external ditch enclosing an area 165 m. by 145 m.[25] Other univallate sites which may be mentioned are at Mount-fortescue, Co. Meath,[26] Magheraknock, Co. Down,[27] and Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny[28].

Lyles Hill, Co. Antrim, is here being included tentatively in the list of Irish hill-forts.[29] The excavator of the site felt convinced that the enclosing rampart and the hilltop cairn were constructed at the same time, that is, in Neolithic times. This view was questioned immediately by Professor M. J. O'Kelly of University College, Cork, who felt that this must represent a two-period site, the rampart constituting the defences of an unfinished Iron Age hill-fort.[30] Professor Evans in his excavation report used as the basis for his hypothesis the great number of Neolithic potsherds which were found incorporated in the bank, the flimsy nature of the latter, the unnecessarily wide and undefended entrance and the complete absence of any evidence of Iron Age occupation on the site. However, in view of the undoubted evidence for extensive Neolithic occupation of the hill any bank constructed after the Neolithic occupation could not have avoided incorporating within its structure considerable quantities of Neolithic material—potsherds, flints and so on. The flimsy rampart and the wide entrance could be explained by Professor O'Kelly's suggestion that the site was unfinished; but it may also have been that the now apparently modest rampart could have served merely as foundation for the quite substantial timber palisade, evidence for which was found on excavation. No

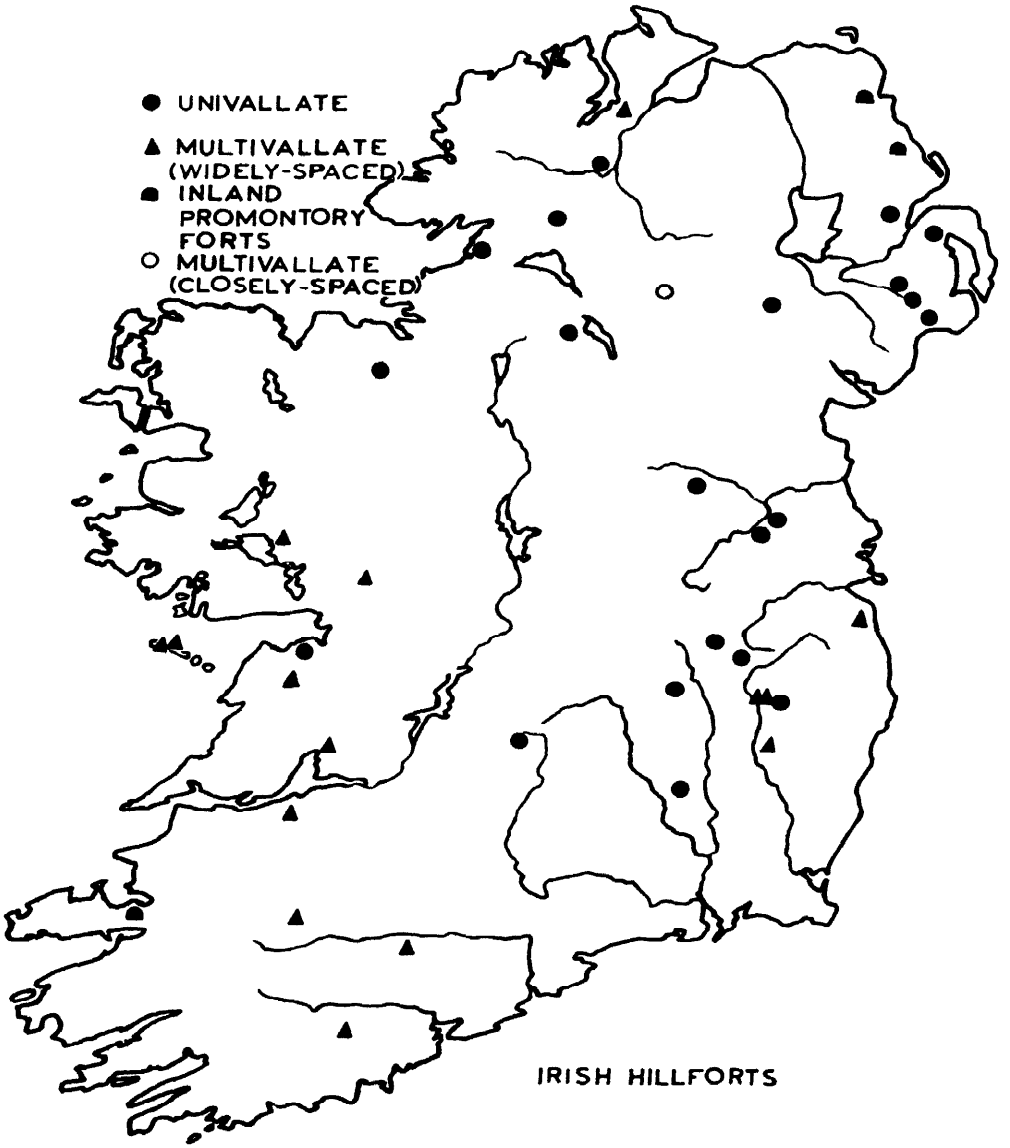

Fig. 14
Preliminary distribution map (1969) of Irish hill-forts

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